

An Embodied Auto-ethnography of Transformation Through Sacred Circle Dance @

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Invocation:

We come whirling out of nothingness,

Scattering stars like dust.

The stars form a circle.

And in the center, we dance.

--Rumi

The quotations that follow (cited from the works of Thomas Hanna, Eugene Gendlin and Les Todres) inform my inquiry:

First-person human experience must be considered of equal scientific and medical importance as outside, third person observation. (Hanna, 1988, p. xiv)

All knowledge is bodily knowledge . . . Everything we experience in our lives is a **bodily** experience. . . . (Hanna, 1988, pp. xii)

We don't just have interactions; we **are** interactions. . . . Experiencing is **felt** rather than **known.**" (Gendlin, 1962, p. 10, 242)

Embodiment cannot be considered separately from **being** and **knowing**. (Todres, p. 1)

By way of making my presentation more experience-near for those to whom this form of dance will be unfamiliar, I ask you now to stand, join hands with the persons on either side of you, and join with me in a brief experience of sacred circle dance. I will suggest some small rhythmic movement, but the philosophy of this dance is, “there are no mistakes, only variations.” So please let go of performance anxiety—this is just for you, no one will be judging. After we finish, please continue to hold hands and remain standing quietly to let the energy of the dance move through you.

ROM: **PRAVO (joyful, lively)** Kaly Jag

*Now take a moment to pay attention to your body. What was this experience like for **you**?*

Perhaps not surprisingly, it is a poet who most clearly articulates the dilemma at the heart of my research project, because at heart, my inquiry taps into the trans-personal, as you may have glimpsed from your brief encounter with Sacred Circle Dance. The words of the Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, may be resonant with your experience:

O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
 Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
 O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
 How can we know the dancer from the dance?

(Yeats, *Among Schoolchildren*, 1933)

Dance is one of the oldest forms of human expression—pre-dating written language—and found in cultures around the world. (Ehrenreich, 2006; Watts, 2006a) Although its function has changed over time and in spite of attempts to suppress it, dance has persisted. But in recent decades, as the need for healing the mind/ body/ spirit split has become clear, there has been a resurgence of many different forms of communal dance and not only in the Western world.

My work is part of this revival. For two decades I have been participating in and teaching Sacred Circle Dance, a practice initiated in 1976 by German ballet teacher, Berhard Wosien, who first brought folk dances he had collected in Eastern Europe to Findhorn (an eco-spiritual community in Scotland) where he hoped they would find a home, because he sensed they were dying out in the villages. To the traditional dances that celebrated the change of seasons and life transitions, he also added some of his own choreographies. This mixture of ancient and new dances became part of Findhorn's weekly offerings and because of the massive flow of people in and out of Findhorn (which continues to this day), the dance practice quickly spread within Great Britain and to many countries in Europe, South America, South Africa, the United States, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand and most recently, Korea.

The dance is brought to new places by “dance ambassadors,” people who have participated in this practice in one country and seed it in another, creating an international network of dancers, “like-hearted” people (Willet, 2016, personal communication), a project that is similar to the work of Yo Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble that brings together musicians

from different cultures to heal the planet and work for world peace. (*The Music of Strangers*, 2016, DVD to be available 2017).

Dancing to music from many different cultures while holding hands, dancing mostly in circles or spirals, those who participate in this practice (myself included) have found that it has spiritual dimensions and a strong transformative potential, personal as well as social. (Watts, 2006a , 2006b) In Bernhard Wosien's poetic words, "Dance is a meditation in movement, where every step becomes a prayer." But in the past decade, this dancing was also taken into the streets and used to help elect President Obama; support the Occupy Wall Street movement; bring attention to One Billion Rising, a world-wide campaign to stop violence against women. And in 2015, a video made by dancers (*Circle Dance for Peace*) was shown at the United Nations on International Peace Day. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IN51Hpla2ek>)

In my previous interview study of 2005, on which I am building, I documented the transformative impact of the dance on the lives of fifteen older women who had been dancing with me for at least a year. I received overwhelmingly positive responses about the impact of the dance on their lives (for example, they reported lasting feelings of:

increased joy; less stress;

inner peace and well-being;

a sense of community;

appreciation of being touched, held by the circle;

being enlivened, remembering you have a body;

a sense of deepening authenticity;

a sense of mastery in new learning;

being fully present, a feeling of greater authenticity;
feeling connected to other beings and to the universe.

While all of these experiences resonated with me deeply, they did not shed light on the processes by which transformation happened through the dance. But that realization did not come to me till nearly a decade later.

Although I had had many years of training as a clinical psychologist, at the time I was doing this research, I had little familiarity with phenomenology or somatics, although I was drawn to these approaches and had wanted to cast my doctoral dissertation in psychology, the healing power of art, in part, as an auto-ethnography, but was told by my advisor that my committee would never approve this method, even if I used it only partially.

So in the past decade, I immersed myself in the writings of those who helped legitimize the approach I am taking today. (Hanna, Gendlin, Bentz & Rehorick, Ellis, Denzin, Bochner, Van Maanen, Todres, Sheets-Johnson, Parviainen, among many others)

In this process of locating myself as researcher, It is also important for me to acknowledge that in this project, I have been supported by the students, faculty and alumnae who constitute the SPCL Group (Somatics, Phenomenology, and Communicative Learning) at The Fielding Graduate University, whose efforts resulted in Fielding institutionalizing these inter-related fields of study as a single learning track.

In addition, a few years ago, Valerie Bentz invited me to bring Sacred Circle Dance into her annual retreats which focused on embodiment and made the theories more actual. We

added Sacred Circle Dance to the Kundalini Yoga she had been using to open the Chakras, followed by processing sessions. We also include Somatic dance, Tibetan bowls, and a closing drum circle.

By means of this lengthy immersion, I have come to see why I was dissatisfied with my previous results; I now understand that “Verbal discourse cannot speak for bodily discourse, but must enter into dialogue with that discourse.” (Foster, 2005) Therefore, to effectively study the transformative aspects of the dance, I had to find a way to access “directly felt experience” and for this reason, I turned to auto-ethnography.

Gathered in the past several months, my data consists of my experience of teaching the dance, which I do at least once weekly (and often two to three times a week) in the Washington, D.C., Maryland and Virginia areas, as well as my experiences dancing at multiple day and week-long workshops in the United States and abroad in which I am both a participant and a teacher.

Throughout the past six months, I kept a field journal for when I danced and separate notes for when I was teaching. In this project I am building on the work of other practitioner/theorists of bodily dance knowledge (Parviainen, Hanna, and Rossen) as well as the theories of Gendlin who has always insisted that meaning is formed in the interaction of experiencing and symbolization. But even with the strong support of theory and method, this project turned out to be quite different from what I had anticipated.

It quickly became clear that as a participant, who was also the focus of my inquiry, I could not fully do the phenomenological reduction or bracketing of everything I believed or had

been taught about the dance or I would have been paralyzed. I was, however, able to set aside pre-conceived expectations of what this process would be like or what I would discover, and so I was able to mobilize a deeper self-awareness of what I was thinking/feeling, and to some extent could monitor the felt sense within my body as I was dancing. I was even able to pay attention to the fact that I sometimes drifted off, and that it was taxing to be participant and a knower at the same time; reflection played a larger role in my data than I had expected.

Nonetheless, while I do not think I uncovered how transformation takes place (I am no longer sure such a project is possible or even desirable) the process of trying to figure it out did enable me to identify several key elements I believe are necessary starting points for transformation; these actually validate what I had been doing intuitively as a teacher and will guide me as I develop this practice further. My inquiry supported the importance of:

Creating a space that will be physically safe
and creating a safe psychological space,
speaking our names aloud each time we dance,
offering intentions for each dance session,
following my intuition,
choosing music that moves me,
flexibility in the dance agenda if my choices don't feel right in the moment,
allowing the dance to have the feeling of ritual.

Recording my thoughts and feelings, I also made discoveries that forced me to dismantle some myths I held about how I actually **was** in the dance, what amounted to epiphanies, "aha"

moments that deepened my understanding of the experience and especially challenged my image of myself.

The biggest myth I dismantled was while I was a participant: I had believed that I was most fully present while I danced. When paying close attention to the flow of energy in my body/thoughts/feelings, I realized that my mind was hardly ever still (of course I already knew this from meditation, but somehow I thought it was different with dance). I found that I was often not only thinking, but to my shock, sometimes judging, for good and for ill – myself, the quality of the space, the temperature of the room, the teacher’s teaching, the choice of dances, the quality of the music, others’ behavior, etc. Luckily, it turns out that you do not need “purity of consciousness” for transformation to happen. Something happens on the cellular level when we move as the music enters the mind/body as we hold hands in a circle.

To my surprise, I discovered that I was most fully present and had the deepest spiritual experiences when I myself was teaching. Far from being distracted by my responsibilities, when I was teaching I found I was so immersed in the dance, making such strong efforts to both teach the steps and convey the energy of the dance to everyone in the group, even those who were having difficulty with the steps, that my monkey mind was not chattering.

I was simply present to what “was,” could also envision what “would be” and was able to immerse myself so deeply in the music and dance that I could effortlessly hold the group. Holding hands with others, moving together to the music, I felt a strong energetic connection within the group, as if we were one structure, one being. We actually dance to a song called *As One*, “As one we walk this earth together, as one we sing to her our song....” and now I really

understood its meaning in the soma, from within. And this energy also radiated out to all beings.

I was also surprised by the realization that when we truly move together in unison, with precision, the energy of the dance is enhanced. In other words, although I do teach that the most important thing is for people to move to the music, not to get the steps right, nonetheless, the energy is different when we all do move together. And experience shows that we carry that energy with us into our daily lives. Many of us have also discovered that there is a spirit of generosity in the dance that metabolizes negativity.

Another belief that was shattered was that the circle has the best energy when it is closed, when there are no gaps between people holding hands. As it turns out, a friend who has MS and is confined to a wheelchair has joined one of our circles and she moves wonderfully with those parts of her body that can move, but when she is there, because she cannot hold hands -- the circle is never closed, and yet, we experience the dance as fully as if it were.

With our strong intentions to keep the circle whole, we tap into a source of communal energy that Edith Stein, a student of Husserl's has written about, which she called "embodied empathic resonance" or "kinesthetic empathy." (Parviainen, 2002, 2003) We know so much more than we can say.

Nearing the end of my report, I think it important to mention one cherished belief that was not shattered by my inquiry-- the belief that I am my most authentic self when I am dancing. I may not always like what I find, but I always feel real to myself. Counter-intuitively, the more we let go into the dance, the more fully we awaken to our deepest selves. Some have

been known to change their life paths after immersion in the dance (Watts, 2006), as was also true for me. No, I did not divorce, as is commonly reported (Watts, 2006), but instead of continuing on the path as a clinical psychologist, I became a devoted student and passionate teacher of the dance as a healing practice. I cannot imagine having done otherwise, yet this shift was totally unexpected. Like me, many people say that in the dance they feel that they have come home to themselves.

In lieu of a summation, I offer a question to ponder. If Yeats is right, and we cannot separate the dancer from the dance, if Gendlin is right that we are not dancing but *are* the dance, should we even be trying to put this deeply internal experience into words? And even when Gendlin tries to re-assure us by saying, “there is no necessity that language kills experiencing” (p. 19), I wonder if perhaps the reverse is true, that in some cases, “experiencing kills language?” makes language unnecessary? Not a happy thought for the success of my project. Perhaps I should just be satisfied knowing there *is* transformation by experiencing it myself and seeing the results in those who dance with me? Perhaps I should stop trying to reach into a mystery that lies beyond words.

In a contemplative spirit, I will end this report of my inquiry by invoking a poem by Pablo Neruda, who asks us,

for once on the face of the earth,

let's not speak in any language;

let's stop for one second,

...

And for once. . . do nothing,

Perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves

...

Perhaps the earth can teach us
As when everything seems dead
And later proves to be alive

...

Now I'll count up to twelve
and you keep quiet and I will go. (Neruda, 1974).

And I will keep dancing.

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